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Consulate Quarterly

*News and information for the U.S. citizen community in Northern Thailand
from the U.S. Consulate General in Chiang Mai*

Message from Consul General Michael K. Morrow

The Consulate is spending the entire year celebrating its 60th anniversary of building strong ties with northern Thailand and serving the American community here. Hopefully many of you have noticed the beautiful murals on our outer wall, painted by students in January under the theme "Freedom Is" That was the kick-off event for our anniversary celebration. Another main event was our two-day business conference last month focused on this region's emergence as a hub for information technology. U.S. IT firms are taking notice of the business opportunities related to this. We invite all Americans living here to take pride in our 60-year relationship with northern Thailand. We very much look forward to the next 60.



Consular Section Closed for Routine Services During Songkran, April 12-16

The U.S. Consulate General in Chiang Mai would like to inform all U.S. citizens in Northern Thailand that its Consular section will be closed for **routine** services during the Songkran holiday, April 12-16, 2010. However, we are always available to assist Americans who experience emergencies, such as deaths, arrests, or serious illnesses. In such situations, please contact the Consulate's American Citizen Services unit at 053-107-777.

The April 12-16 closure affects non-emergency services, such as passport issuance (including extra pages and picking up new passports), notarials (including those required for Thai immigration purposes), reports of birth, and federal benefits assistance (including picking up checks). If you will require any of these during April 12-16, please plan to take care of them before Songkran week.

For routine services, please make an appointment at our website, <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service/appointments/>. Also, for any last-minute needs, we will have special, walk-in service hours on Friday, April 9 from 0800 to 1100. We are not accepting appointments for April 9; service will be on a first-come, first-served basis.

The Consulate wishes you and your families a happy and safe Songkran.

Proposed Changes to Consular Fees

The Department of State has proposed changing the fees that you pay for services at the Consulate. According to the proposal, some fees will go up, while others will go down.

WHY? The last major update of the Schedule of Fees was in 2005, and the Department performed a new cost of service study in June 2009. The proposed changes to the fee schedule reflect more accurately the true cost of doing business. This way, services of direct benefit to individuals, organizations, or groups are paid for by the users rather than by taxpayers in general.

HOW MUCH? How these changes will affect our most popular services at the Consulate:

The cost of **notarial services**, including affidavits and certifications, will increase from \$30 to \$50 per seal.

The security surcharge for both **adult and minor passports** will increase from \$20 to \$40 to cover the costs of increased border security, which includes enhanced biometric features in the document.

- The total charge for a first-time passport book for an adult, including the application fee, security surcharge, and execution fee, will increase from \$100 to \$135.
- The total charge for an adult passport book renewal, including the application fee and security surcharge, will increase from \$75 to \$110.
- The total charge for a minor passport book (age 16 and under), including the application fee, security surcharge and execution fee, will increase from \$85 to \$105.

There will now be a fee for **adding visa pages to existing passport books**.

- Adding visa pages to an existing passport book requires nearly the same resources as a new passport book.
- The study found that the cost of the pages themselves, having the pages placed in the book in a secure manner by trained personnel, and completing the required security checks costs the U.S. Government \$82.48.
- The Department will charge \$82 for this service.

The cost of a **Consular Report of Birth Abroad (CRBA)**, for children born in Thailand to U.S. citizens, will increase from \$65 to \$100.

For full details of the proposed changes, see:

<http://www.regulations.gov/search/Regs/home.html#documentDetail?R=0900006480a8ffe8>

WHEN? The Department of State is accepting comments on these proposals until April 8. After that, the Department will announce a deadline for us to introduce the fee changes. When that happens, we will send another email to all registered Americans to alert you the change.

I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT THESE CHANGES... You may send comments to fees@state.gov. Be sure to include this number in the subject line of your message: RIN 1400-AC58.

WHAT ABOUT VISA FEES? The Department also has proposed increasing the application fee for most types of nonimmigrant visas from \$131 to \$140. If you have a Thai friend or spouse who will be traveling to the U.S. soon, this proposal will affect him or her. Full details are available at:

<http://www.regulations.gov/search/Regs/home.html#documentDetail?R=0900006480a6a10b>



New Money!

To stay one step ahead of counterfeiters, the U.S. Treasury will introduce a redesigned \$100 bill on April 21. Older versions of the bill will continue to remain valid. For details, see www.newmoney.gov.

Social Security Administration Now Sending Benefits Checks Directly to Recipients

Those of you who receive Social Security benefits in paper check form might have noticed some changes this month. Your check came in a smaller, Treasury Department envelope, not the usual white one from the Consulate. Also, it probably came a bit quicker than usual.

That's because, effective March 1, 2010, the Social Security Administration began using International Priority Airmail (IPA) to send checks directly to recipients in Thailand, bypassing the Embassy and Consulate. (If you receive your money via Direct Deposit, this change does not affect you.)

We're sorry that we did not let you know about the change in advance. In fact, it was a surprise to the Consulate, the Embassy, and the Social Security regional office in Manila – we learned about it when some of you reported getting your checks directly from the U.S. Treasury!

WHY? FASTER IS BETTER

The Social Security Administration made this change so you get your check faster. In the old system, Social Security sent checks from the U.S. to the Embassy in Bangkok via diplomatic pouch. Embassy Bangkok had to log them in, sort them, forward them to us, then log them out. Once they got to Chaing Mai, we would log them in, re-address them, add postage.... *Basta!* You get the idea – it was more steps than was necessary. Using airmail allows Social Security to cut out all of the intermediate steps and send the checks straight to you, just like they would do in the U.S.

WHAT'S THE CATCH?

Like most good things, there is a catch: Your address on the check has to be correct. If your address is incorrect (or incorrectly formatted), Thailand Post cannot deliver it to you and will have to return it to Social Security. The result could be an interruption in your benefits.

To prevent this from happening, it is vital that your address on file with Social Security is correct. If you need to correct it, we would be happy to help. Please make an appointment on our website for "Notarial and Other Services": <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service/appointments/>. When you come, be sure to bring in your most recent check or other correspondence from the Social Security Administration.

THE DIRECT DEPOSIT ALTERNATIVE

Want to get your money faster? Concerned about the security of your check? Sign up for Direct Deposit. See the article on page 7.

Air Quality Alert

Editor's Note: We sent out a Warden Message on this same topic earlier this month. We are repeating it because of its importance to everyone living in Northern Thailand.

Every year, Chiang Mai and other areas of Northern Thailand experience periods of unhealthy air during the dry season until the beginning of the rainy season in May. Smoke in the air can hurt your eyes, irritate your respiratory system, and worsen chronic heart and lung disease. People who have heart or lung disease, older adults, and children are the most sensitive to smoke and most likely to experience health problems as a result.

You should be aware of the local Air Quality Index (AQI) and take appropriate measures to minimize the impact on you and your family's health. The Thai government's Pollution Control Department calculates the AQI daily and posts measurements at the following website: <http://www.pcd.go.th/AirQuality/Regional/Default.cfm>

The following is the explanation of the AQI from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (<http://airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=aqibasics.aqi>):

- **"Good" AQI is 0-50.** Air quality is considered satisfactory, and air pollution poses little or no risk.
- **"Moderate" AQI is 51-100.** Air quality is acceptable; however, for some pollutants there may be a moderate health concern for a very small number of people. For example, people who are unusually sensitive to ozone may experience respiratory symptoms.
- **"Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" AQI is 101-150.** Although general public is not likely to be affected at this AQI range, people with lung disease, older adults and children are at a greater risk from exposure to ozone, whereas persons with heart and lung disease, older adults and children are at greater risk from the presence of particles in the air.
- **"Unhealthy" AQI is 151-200.** Everyone may begin to experience some adverse health effects, and members of the sensitive groups may experience more serious effects.
- **"Very Unhealthy" AQI is 201-300.** This would trigger a health alert signifying that everyone may experience more serious health effects.
- **"Hazardous" AQI is greater than 300.** This would trigger health warnings of emergency conditions. The entire population is more likely to be affected.

To protect yourself and your family, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the following (<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/wildfires/facts.asp>):

- **Pay attention to local air quality reports.** Listen and watch for news or health warnings about smoke. Also pay attention to public health messages about taking additional safety measures.
- If you are advised to stay indoors, **keep indoor air as clean as possible.** Keep windows and doors closed unless it is extremely hot outside. Run an air conditioner if you have one, but keep the fresh-air intake closed and the filter clean to prevent outdoor smoke from getting inside. If you do not have an air conditioner and it is too warm to stay inside with the windows closed, seek shelter elsewhere.
- **Do not add to indoor pollution.** When smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles, fireplaces, or gas stoves. Do not vacuum, because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home. Do not smoke, because smoking puts even more pollution into the air.
- **Follow your doctor's advice** about medicines and about your respiratory management plan if you have asthma or another lung disease. Call your doctor if your symptoms worsen.
- **Do not rely on dust masks for protection.** Paper "comfort" or "dust" masks commonly found at hardware stores are designed to trap large particles, such as sawdust. These masks will not protect your lungs from smoke.

New Law Makes Absentee Voting Easier for Overseas Americans

On October 28, 2009, Congress enacted the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act. This legislation amends existing law regarding overseas voting in federal elections, and should make voting easier for overseas Americans.

NEW PROCEDURES FOR 2010 ELECTIONS

Beginning with the November 2010 general election, and for all subsequent general, special, and primary elections, states will be required to mail out ballots at least 45 days prior to an election for a federal office. This requirement may cause some states to select earlier primary dates in order to comply with the 45 day mailing deadline, or to request waivers due to special circumstances.

In addition to mailing ballots to overseas voters, the states will be required, at the voter's request, to provide registration forms, absentee ballot request forms, and blank ballots via fax or email. However, each state's laws determine whether ballot requests or voted ballots can be returned via fax or email.

OVERSEAS ABSENTEE BALLOT REQUESTS

Effective immediately, states will no longer be required by federal law to continue to mail election materials to overseas addresses (even when they are determined to be invalid) for two complete general election cycles on the basis of a single ballot request. It will now be up to each state to determine how long to continue to send out election materials before requiring overseas voters to submit new ballot requests. This change, sought by local election officials, should greatly decrease the volume of voting materials sent abroad to addresses where Americans no longer reside.

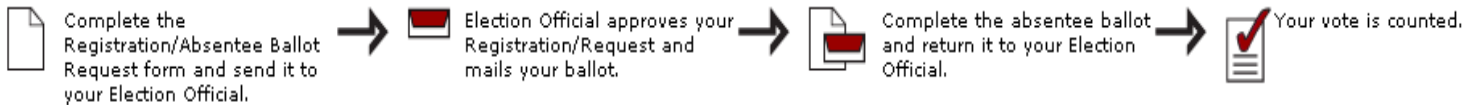
STATE DEPARTMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of these changes, the Department of State recommends that all U.S. voters residing abroad request absentee ballots from their local election officials at the start of each calendar year, and whenever there is a change of address, change of e-mail address, or change of name, by completing and sending in a Federal Post Card Application (FPCA).

The Department of State strongly encourages all U.S. overseas voters to provide email addresses or fax numbers on their FPCAs to enable local election officials to transmit election materials in the fastest manner available, which should then allow sufficient time for the return of voted ballots. For information regarding your specific state, please visit www.fvap.gov.

To locate information on your specific state's requirements, and to obtain an on-line version of the FPCA, please visit www.fvap.gov. FPCAs may be mailed to your local voting officials in the United States via international mail or from any U.S. embassy or consulate. Many states allow U.S. citizens overseas to submit the FPCA by e-mail or fax.

Absentee Voting Overview



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EMERGENCY BALLOTS

The Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) serves as an emergency ballot for the November general elections for federal offices, although some states also permit its use for elections for state and local offices. Beginning in January 2011, the new law allows use of the FWAB for primary, special, and runoff elections for federal offices. Voters who request an absentee ballot in advance of their state's ballot request deadline, but who fail to receive an official ballot from local election officials in time to vote, should complete the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot and send it back to local election officials in time for it to be counted. An on-line version of the FWAB, together with instructions for its use, is available at www.fvap.gov.

FOR FUTHER INFORMATION...

The Consulate recently created a special Voting Assistance page on our website:

<http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service/services/voting-assistance.html>

The American Citizen Services unit is available to answer questions about absentee voting. To contact the Voting Assistance Officer, send an e-mail to acschn@state.gov.

If you prefer to come in person, please make an appointment for "notarial and other services" on our website, <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service/appointments/>.

Are you registered with the U.S. Consulate in Chiang Mai? *Really?*

In a crisis or an emergency, we rely on up-to-date registration information to contact American citizens. But e-mail addresses, telephone numbers, and residences change often.



If you cannot remember when you last updated your registration with the Consulate, **now** is the time to go online and check! And if you haven't yet registered online, **now** is the time to do it.

Visit <https://travelregistration.state.gov> today to make sure your contact information is current. Please pass the word to other Americans you know. Help us to be able to contact you in an emergency or crisis. Thanks!

Tax Time is Coming...

Editor's Note: By popular demand, we repeat this article from our last issue. Also, we have created a new page on our website with this information, <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service/services/u.s.-taxes>

Since the beginning of the year, many of us have been receiving W-2s, 1099s, and other Internal Revenue Service (IRS) forms from employers, governments, banks, or financial institutions. Though taxpayers outside the United States get an extension of time to file their tax returns, it might take a while to get everything you need. We recommend that you get started early.

Read Me First: For U.S. taxpayers overseas, the first stop for official information about filing deadlines, mailing addresses, and exchange rates is the IRS web page for U.S. citizens and resident aliens abroad: <http://www.irs.gov/businesses/small/international/article/0,,id=97324,00.html>

Tax Due Date: If you reside overseas, you are allowed an automatic two-month extension to file your return until June 15. However, any tax due must be paid by the original return due date (April 15) to avoid interest charges.

Tax Forms: We recommend that you get forms directly from the IRS website at: www.irs.gov/formspubs/index.html. All IRS forms are available there, including computer-fillable versions of many. Due to space constraints, the Consulate does not stock many IRS forms.

Your Address: When filling out your tax forms, please be sure to use your complete and correct mailing address. That is the address where the IRS will try to contact you if there are problems with your tax return. It also is the address where the IRS will send your tax refund check, if you receive one. **Please do not use the Consulate's address on your tax forms.** We do not have the capacity to store or forward mail for you. If you do not have a reliable mailing address in Thailand, we recommend that you ask family or friends in the United States to receive it for you. If we receive items from the IRS addressed to you, we must return them to the IRS.

Direct Deposit: If you expect to get a tax refund, you can specify that the IRS deposit the money directly into a U.S. bank account. To get your refund more quickly and to avoid the possibility that the check is delayed, misdirected, or lost in the mail, we recommend that you take advantage of this option. Again, please do not have refund checks sent to you at the Consulate. If we receive them, we must return them to the IRS, which will delay your receiving your refund.

Mailing: Please mail your tax documents early enough to ensure that they reach the IRS before filing deadlines. We recommend that you use Fedex, UPS, DHL, or Thailand Post EMS services. These allow you to track your correspondence and have delivery confirmation -- peace of mind for something so important. The Consulate is not an IRS or U.S. postal facility, so we cannot accept tax returns for the IRS or mail them for you.

Tax Preparation Assistance: This year, the IRS will not be able to send customer service personnel to Thailand to provide tax assistance. Instead, the IRS office in Philadelphia will provide international tax assistance. Their contact information is available at: <http://www.irs.gov/businesses/small/international/article/0,,id=97324,00.html>.

Federal regulations state that the Consulate cannot provide advice on the preparation of tax returns. If you need tax advice or services, we recommend that you contact a law or accounting firm qualified in U.S. tax law. There is a specialist tax firm listed on the Consulate's list of Legal Service Providers: <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/root/pdfs/2009-attorney-list.pdf>.

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Tax Treatment of Social Security Benefits: Some people have to pay federal income taxes on their Social Security benefits. This usually happens only if you have other substantial income (such as wages, self-employment, interest, dividends and other taxable income that must be reported on your tax return) in addition to your benefits. Please see the Social Security Administration website: www.socialsecurity.gov/planners/taxes.htm and IRS Publication 915, *Social Security and Equivalent Railroad Retirement Benefits*.

Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN): If you have a spouse or dependent who is not eligible for a Social Security number, but needs an identification number for U.S. federal tax purposes, you can get an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) from the IRS. Please see the IRS website for more details: <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96287,00.html>.

To ensure that you receive the ITIN in time for file your taxes on time, please apply for it well in advance. For a fee, the Consulate can certify copies of documents required for the ITIN application. Please make an appointment for "other services" via our appointment website: <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service/appointments/>.

State and Local Taxes: If you are a United States taxpayer abroad, you might also have tax liabilities to one or more states, districts, or territories in the U.S. Please contact the relevant state, district, or territory Department of Revenue or Department of Taxation. A list of these agencies is available at: <http://www.aicpa.org/yellow/yptsgus.htm>



Direct Deposit: From the U.S. Treasury, Straight to You!

Are you tired of waiting and waiting to receive your monthly Social Security, Veterans Administration, or other U.S. federal benefit check? Do you get frustrated when the Consulate tells you that the checks haven't arrived yet?

If you sign up for Direct Deposit, the U.S. Treasury will deposit the money directly into your bank account every month. Because there is no paper check, you don't have to pick it up at the Consulate or wait for it to show up in the mail. It cannot be delayed in transit, lost, or stolen. You do not have to cash it or deposit it at the bank. Instead, the money will be in your bank account at the same time every month. Also, you don't have to worry about your check if you travel or move.

Because of these advantages, the U.S. Treasury encourages everyone who receives a monthly check from the U.S. government to sign up for Direct Deposit. We can help you with this.

For more information and to learn how to get started, visit the Federal Benefits page of our website, available at: <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service/services/federal-benefits-and-taxes/>

Routine Consular Services in Chiang Mai

AMERICAN CITIZEN SERVICES (ACS) HOURS:

- Tuesdays and Thursdays **by appointment only**.
- For additional information and to make an appointment:
 - <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/service.html>

Selected American Citizen Services and fees:

Notary services: \$30.00 <i>including affidavits for Thai immigration, for getting married in Thailand, or to obtain a Thai driver's license</i>
Minor passport (under age of 16): \$85.00
First Adult Passport (age 16 and over): \$100.00
Adult Passport Renewal: \$75.00
Replacement for a lost or stolen passport: \$100.00
Consular Report of Birth Abroad (for children born to American citizens in Thailand): \$65.00
<i>The Consulate accepts U.S. dollars, Thai baht, and Credit cards. We cannot accept checks.</i>

- **American Citizen Registration:** We encourage American citizens living or traveling in Thailand to register with the Consulate online: <https://travelregistration.state.gov>
- **Visa Inquiries:** We **cannot** accept inquiries about visas during American Citizen Service hours. If you are an American citizen inquiring on behalf of a visa applicant, please see the Non-Immigrant Visa websites listed below or send an email to: conschiangmai@state.gov.

NON-IMMIGRANT VISA (NIV) HOURS:

- Mondays and Wednesdays **by appointment only**.
- For additional information and to make an appointment:
 - <http://chiangmai.usconsulate.gov/visas.html>
 - <http://thailand.us-visaservices.com/>

IMMIGRANT VISAS, FIANCÉE VISAS, AND GREEN CARDS:

These services are handled by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. Please communicate directly with them by using the contact information below.

USEFUL CONTACT INFORMATION:

United States Government		
U.S. Embassy Bangkok	022-054-000	http://bangkok.usembassy.gov
Immigrant Visa Unit (Bangkok)	visasbkk@state.gov	http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/immigrant_visas.html
American Citizen Services (Bangkok)	acsbkk@state.gov	http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/service.html
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	bkkcis.inquiries@dhs.gov	http://uscis.gov
Electronic System for Travel Authorization (Visa Waiver Program)		https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/
Internal Revenue Service (tax information and forms)		http://www.irs.gov/
Social Security Administration		http://www.ssa.gov
Adoption Information		http://adoption.state.gov